

# Implementing a Unit Manning System

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**T**HREE YEARS into a new defense-oriented administration, the U.S. Army finds itself still adjusting to change. The services are enjoying substantial funding increases; U.S. Armed Forces have completed a successful invasion and regime change abroad; and the Army has a new chief of staff. The Army is examining new employment concepts and new technology to fill a capabilities gap between light and heavy forces, and it is implementing a new unit manning system (UMS).

Sound familiar? The year: 1983.

Twenty years ago, President Ronald Reagan, 3 years into his first term, had made substantial increases to the Department of Defense's budget, setting the stage for the collapse of the Soviet Union and the breakup of the Warsaw Pact. In June 1983, General John A. Wicham became the Army Chief of Staff. In November, U.S. Armed Forces invaded the island of Grenada to rescue college students and to unseat the People's Revolutionary Government as Grenada's governing party. The High Technology Test Bed (HTTP) at Fort Lewis, Washington, a program whose mission was to acquire and test new and experimental equipment and materiel, was in its second year, and the Army was in the third year of implementing its new manning system—COHORT (Cohesion, Operational Readiness, and Training) and the U.S. Army Regimental System.<sup>1</sup>

In 1983, General Donn A. Starry, the commander of the U.S. Readiness Command, proposed seven requirements for implementing effective change in the Army: Architect of the Future, leadership culture, pronency, consensus, leadership continuity, top-level support, and testing.<sup>2</sup> Starry wrote, "This

framework is necessary to bring to bear clearly focused intellectual activity in the matter of any change, whether in concepts for fighting, equipment, training, or manning the force."<sup>3</sup>

In 1984, Colonel Huba Wass de Czege extended Starry's framework by proposing an additional requirement—theory.<sup>4</sup> Wass de Czege argued that intellectual change must precede substantive change and that the Army needed to cultivate a cadre of "artful practitioners"—masters of the art and science of war.<sup>5</sup>

Many soldiers who took their oaths in 1983 are now retiring, but Starry and Wass de Czege's requirements for change are still as compelling as they were originally, and the environment is at least as challenging. Ours is an Army of continuity and change. Soldiers, ideas, and initiatives come and go, but the requirements for effective change are timeless and well worth considering in today's Army Transformation initiatives. In particular, Starry and Wass de Czege's concepts can help us examine a UMS that rotates soldiers in and out of units in groups rather than individually, provides better soldier assignment predictability, and improves unit cohesion and readiness.

In September 2002, then Secretary of the Army Thomas White resurrected the UMS as part of his vision for a total personnel system overhaul.<sup>6</sup> But, in April 2003, with the UMS trial balloon barely off the ground, White resigned. His resignation left the future of the UMS uncertain.<sup>7</sup>

Before he resigned, White approved the implementation of the UMS pilot (to go into effect in summer 2003) and linked it to the transformation of the 172d Infantry Brigade into a Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT).<sup>8</sup> Later in 2003, the UMS—now termed Force Stabilization—became one of the Army Focus Areas under Chief of Staff of the Army

*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or any other government office or agency.—Editor*

General Peter J. Schoomaker. Will unit manning continue beyond the pilot programs? Perhaps. But other Army and national priorities could easily crowd out the UMS.

The Congressional Budget Office recently projected a \$1.9-trillion federal budget deficit over the next 10 years.<sup>9</sup> The affordability of national defense will inevitably become an issue even as Congress considers authorizing additional troops for the Army to relieve stress on the force while we are fighting a war.<sup>10</sup>

Related defense planning is underway to “set” the force: to establish new worldwide military basing arrangements and prepare forces to fight the next fight. Equally important, the Army has invested heavily in new concepts, technologies, and systems for the Future Force, a more strategically responsive, full-spectrum force. This is what we *think we know* today. There is much more about the future that we do not and cannot know.

If we believe unit manning can enhance unit readiness by reducing personnel turbulence in an era that threatens to be particularly stormy, how can the Army manage it in a way that promotes its long-term success? Perhaps we should reconsider the Starry and Wass de Czege requirements framework. Doing so might help focus the Army’s effort to manage change and to determine if the current UMS effort makes the “right” changes, integrates them smoothly, and minimizes negative effects on readiness.

### Architect of the Future

*There must be an institution or mechanism to identify the need and draw up parameters for change, describe clearly what is to be done and how that differs from what has been done before.*—Starry<sup>11</sup>

Unlike some previous unit manning efforts, the current UMS initiative has a champion in the ranks of the Army’s most-senior leaders. In January 2003,

Tankers of the 2d Infantry Division’s 4th Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment at the Korea Training Center. The Army is looking at the broad changes it could make to create more cohesive units, more stability for soldiers and families, and therefore higher readiness, as opposed to perpetuating a personnel system that detracts from cohesion.



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White called personnel transformation “the most important thing we are doing . . . the second phase of Transformation.”<sup>12</sup> But White resigned, and until Schoomaker became Chief of Staff, it was not clear who would take up the UMS torch and keep it an Army priority. But even after Schoomaker’s tenure ends, the requirement for an Architect of the Future will remain. The UMS will remain a work in progress.

In many respects, the Army’s emerging plans for the UMS are not significantly different from some COHORT models of the 1980s. A few new policy wrinkles are under consideration, however. For example, unlike the COHORT system, today’s UMS will include management of commissioned officer assignments. Today’s UMS planners clearly recognize the similarities and differences between today’s operating environment and the past.

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## **Leadership Culture**

*The educational background of the principal staff and command personalities responsible for change must be sufficiently rigorous, demanding and relevant to bring a common cultural bias to the solution of problems.*—Starry<sup>13</sup>

Because White had served 23 years in uniform, he had an appreciation of Army culture that brought credibility to his support for the UMS. Yet early on, at least, most senior uniformed leaders remained silent on the issue, reserving judgment on unit manning until the outlines of the new program were clear.<sup>14</sup> Whether this silence indicated agreement, ambivalence, or dissent is not clear.

In the UMS, the "personalities responsible for change" actually exist at every organizational level in the Army hierarchy, not just at the top. The relevant cultural bias of today's Army comes from years of experience with an individual replacement system (IRS). Most soldiers today understand only the training habits and individual expectations that evolved as a by-product of the IRS turbulence they experienced. These habits and expectations will be difficult to break.

Successfully implementing the UMS will require a significant amount of individual introspection; leadership to establish and enforce standards across the Army; and sustained effort in professional education, particularly that of the commissioned officer

corps. Soldier, scholar, and noted thinker on Army professionalism Don M. Snider says, "If you change what the officers think, you will succeed in changing the culture."<sup>15</sup> And if the Army wants to change what officers think, it must give them *time* to think.

Even in peacetime, the day-to-day froth of maintaining a ready Army consumes an officer's intellectual capital. How many latter-day Dwight D. Eisenhowers work for a mentor like Major General Fox Conner, who directed then Major Eisenhower to read Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* three times during Eisenhower's early 1920s assignment in Panama?<sup>16</sup> For most officers today there simply is not enough time.

Current Army efforts to establish distance-education and other short-length alternatives to months or years of resident education might provide broader educational opportunities and greater flexibility, particularly during the current surge in worldwide operations. But in the long-term, the Army must not drastically reduce officers' time for focused intellectual growth. The UMS and, more important, the Army's future as an institution depend on continued educational investment—in both funding *and* time.

## **Proponency**

*There must be a spokesman for change . . . a person, an institution, or a staff agency.*—Starry<sup>17</sup>

In a 1989 assessment of the COHORT initiative undertaken for Chief of Staff of the Army General Carl E. Vuono, General Maxwell R. Thurman advocated that the Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans (today's G3) oversee UMS policy and procedure. Thurman recommended the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (today's G1) assume a supporting role and the Army Personnel Command continue to directly manage the UMS. Thurman contended that "the UMS has always been viewed as a purely personnel system, losing sight of the meaning of the COHORT acronym. The 'G3 network,' at all echelons, has been largely uninvolved while personnel policy has been pursued aggressively."<sup>18</sup>

Vuono subsequently approved Thurman's recommendation for G3 proponency, but perhaps too late to save COHORT. Today the Army G3 is planning overseas unit rotations but is not the UMS lead. If past experience is any guide, the G3 will not volunteer for UMS proponency, nor will the G1 gladly surrender it. In the long run, however, the G3, with related proponency for force structure and unit readiness, has the greatest staff interest in successful unit manning. In the interest of long-term UMS



Pennsylvania Guardsman of the 28th Infantry Division training for a Kosovo rotation, Fort Polk, Louisiana, 20 June 2003.

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viability, the Army should reconsider the G3's proclivity early in UMS implementation, not at the end.

## Consensus

*The spokesman must build a consensus that will give the new ideas, and the need to adopt them, a wider audience of converts and believers.*—Starry<sup>19</sup>


A fundamental change to the Army's manning system will require debate before buy-in. The views of the Army rank and file remain to be seen, but more than one contemporary critic argues that unit manning is something of a cure-all.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, improving Army readiness is not as simple as throwing magic UMS beans out the window. We must carefully consider the long-term tradeoffs between unit readiness and the professional and leader development of soldiers in those units.

Unit manning could come at a price. Are we willing to deliberately manage Army force structure to reduce turbulence that rapid structure change induces? Can the Army implement unit manning without breaking faith with its soldiers? Will we inadvertently reduce opportunities for young of-

ficers and noncommissioned officers to lead?

Critical thought and internal debate are vital to a profession. The absence of debate today on unit manning should be unsettling even if pressing operational challenges are likely the cause. The Army is still fighting in Iraq, fighting terrorism, and ready to defend in Korea; we do not have time to think of much else. But, perhaps, the lack of debate over unit manning might come from the Army professional's sense of loyalty and a "can do" attitude—an attitude that is often an asset, but sometimes a weakness.<sup>21</sup> White directed UMS implementation, and the Army said, "Hooah." Former Chief of Staff of the Army General Gordon R. Sullivan liked to remind us "hope is not a method."<sup>22</sup> Neither is "hooah."

The Army must embed UMS in personnel management policies and procedures, but it should also assess and modify unit training; readiness and resource management; and leader-development programs. In doing so, the Army will initiate a thoughtful, internal debate to renew its professional self-concept. The alternative—blaming "personnel bureaucrats" and a hide-bound IRS for past disappointments—is not a productive one.<sup>23</sup>



Soldiers from the 82d Airborne Division awaiting transportation to Southwest Asia as part of their rotation to Iraq, Charleston Air Force Base, January 2004.

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## Theory

*Theory constitutes "the fundamental key to controlling and integrating change effectively." It reveals the "why" behind past, present and projected conditions, methods and means of war.*—Wass de Czege<sup>24</sup>

The UMS Task Force's 2002 charter required a review of previous unit manning initiatives, and it directed the Task Force not to conduct a new, detailed study of these concepts, perhaps so it could meet implementation time lines.<sup>25</sup> New manning policies will obviously focus on the "what" of the unit manning initiative, but early on the Army must renew its focus on the "why." Much of the Army's current knowledge is dated, and although many human characteristics are timeless, some behaviors and attitudes vary between generations.<sup>26</sup>

Significantly, the Personnel Research and Development section of the 2003 *Army Modernization Plan* proposed no new unit manning-related research.<sup>27</sup> The Army should, of course, avoid unfocused efforts and "paralysis by analysis." But without specifically making the case for the "why," the need for changing the manning system will not be fully inculcated, and a future generation of Army leaders might not fully appreciate or learn how to leverage the cohesion that might accrue from unit manning. A consensus could easily fail to develop, and the UMS might again wither. Additional investment in organizational and behavioral research would help reveal the theory behind the unit manning initiative and support its viability.

## Leadership Continuity

*There must be continuity among the architects of change so that consistency of effort is brought to bear on the process.*—Starry<sup>28</sup>

Although the leaders who directed its implementation were committed to a viable UMS, priorities change with officeholders and strategic, operational, and budgetary environments as well. Will future secretaries of the Army and chiefs of staff be as supportive as their predecessors?

Former Chief of Staff of the Army General Eric K. Shinseki sought an "irreversible momentum" for Army Transformation. In congressional testimony shortly before he retired, he said, "My challenge is how to get as much done in a very short tenure—four years—to get as much momentum

and education going at a time when you know that the patience of education is more important than the bumper sticker of marketing. Marketed the wrong way, when a chief leaves at the end of four years, a lot of it will leave with him if you are not careful."<sup>29</sup>

A clear vision and strong resolve to bring about change creates irreversible momentum through structural and budgetary commitments that bind the Army to a future course from which it is difficult to stray. The key to establishing irreversible momentum for unit manning is to link it to the operational flow of overseas unit rotations. The personnel system will, of necessity, focus more on readiness output—building the units that rotate overseas—and less on individual personnel management input.

## Top-Level Support

*Someone at or near the top of the institution must be willing to hear out arguments for change, agree to the need, embrace the new concepts and become at least a supporter, if not a champion, of the cause for change.*—Starry<sup>30</sup>

Since top-level Army support for the UMS seems assured, the question now is, to what degree will other senior decisionmakers support the UMS? Their support for unit manning by itself is not as important as their support for the related Army programs of readiness, force modernization, and force structure on which successful unit manning depends. Sustaining the UMS will be problematic without the ability to meet current and projected readiness needs and sustained investment in future capabilities.

Providing a sufficiently robust active force structure, in terms of quantity, content, and availability, is essential to support the Army's likely operational requirements in the foreseeable future. The Army has mobilized hundreds of thousands of Reserve Component soldiers in the last two years. We must ask, If Reserve Components are constantly mobilized, are they still a reserve?

In the past, the Army used the IRS to adjust to rapid structural and mission fluxes. The Army sacrifices much of that flexibility with a UMS. Assuming a 6-month deployment standard, a ratio of five units in the United States to every one unit deployed overseas to meet forward presence and contingency requirements might give soldiers a sufficient break between deployments in which to accomplish individual training and education.<sup>31</sup> A 5 to 1 ratio would also provide the Army sufficient organizational slack to address contingency requirements.

We should remember that after the early battles in Operation Iraqi Freedom, some pundits renewed their calls for reducing the Army's size in favor of technological and less manpower-intensive warfighting capabilities. Those calls soon faded,



but in an era of rising government deficit pressures, those calls will return. If the Army cuts combat force structure without reducing missions, units and soldiers might live in a perpetual state of preparing to deploy, deploying, and recovering from deployment. If soldiers become harder to retain when the economy and the civilian job market rebounds and Army recruiting lags, the UMS will likely become unsustainable.

## Testing

*Changes proposed must be subjected to trials. Their relevance must be demonstrated to a wide audience by experiment and experience, and necessary modifications must be made as a result of such trial outcomes.*—Starry<sup>32</sup>

In his 1989 unit manning assessment, Thurman said, "Our initial strategy was to implement the UMS Armywide without prior testing."<sup>33</sup> This statement is as true today as when Thurman wrote it. Currently, no plan exists to formally experiment with alternative constructs before implementing the UMS. The Army initially considered a testing plan but rejected it in order to move quickly to meet the implementation time line and because of worldwide operational requirements.<sup>34</sup>

The Army does not need to test unit manning to determine the benefits of "task cohesion;" ample experience tells us that the more cohesive units are, the more combat-ready they are. Instead, the Army needs to test alternative UMS models to determine

what policies and procedures best balance necessary levels of cohesion with the Army's ability to sustain the new system in projected strategic, operational, and budgetary environments. Objective testing might also encourage debate and consensus building and support a long-term commitment to sustaining the UMS.

Regardless of the original plan, UMS testing will be a "trial by fire" in the coming years of operational deployments. The test to determine if this wartime replacement system can survive in a peacetime Army will come much later.

The current UMS initiative has unquestionably enjoyed dedicated Architects of the Future in White and Schoomaker. But 20 years ago an architect alone proved insufficient to sustain change. Despite Meyer's unqualified support, the HTTB soon ran out of steam after he retired.<sup>35</sup>

The only thing certain in the Army's future is constant change. For the current UMS initiative to succeed, the Army must maintain top-level support and a sufficiently resourced effort that fosters broad organizational and intellectual change over time. The current UMS effort will also benefit from greater emphasis on research and experimentation to develop its underlying theory and help build consensus for the UMS Armywide.

The Army can implement this change effectively. Fighting a war provides the impetus. Twenty years ago, Starry and Wass de Czege told us how to make it stick. **MR**

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